

## Inmates pronounce Shakespeare's words uplifting to their lives



*Tabitha Davis looks up from her script from 'Macbeth' during the Shakespeare Corrected program at the Decatur Correctional Center.*

NOVEMBER 21, 2014 BY ALLISON PETTY H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR – When Equilla Lamon watched a recording of herself performing in “The Taming of the Shrew,” she laughed so hard she cried.

The 56-year-old inmate at the Decatur Correctional Center said she would have never thought that could be her. Like many of her fellow cast members, she had never read much Shakespeare or done any acting before starting to prepare for the production, which took place in April.

“I said, 'Ooh, I ain’t never thought about Shakespeare,' but when I did it, I saw that other character in me. I saw the other qualities in me,” Lamon said. “It lets you know that you’re capable of anything that you put your mind to, and I was happy about that.”

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*Alex Miller, an associate professor of theater at Millikin University, looks over a copy of Alice Eckart's lines for 'MacBeth.'*

Now, Lamon is among the inmates preparing for “Macbeth,” which is slated to be the fourth show from the Shakespeare Corrected program that began in 2011. The offenders staged “Othello” in 2012 and “The Tempest” in 2013.

Millikin University associate professor Alex Miller was inspired by the “Shakespeare Behind Bars” program that began at Luther Lockett Correctional Complex in Kentucky and later was chronicled in a documentary film. He offered to start something similar in Decatur, where he received a warm reception from prison officials.

Miller runs practice at the prison twice a week, sometimes assisted by dedicated student volunteers.

He begins in the fall by reading through the selected play with the women and making sure they understand what is being said. After he gets to know their personalities, he makes casting decisions, which can sometimes be thrown off course if an inmate leaves the program for parole or other reasons. The plays are staged in the spring.

The women also practice monologues from other Shakespeare works, delivering them in front of the group and receiving guidance from Miller until they feel comfortable with the language. He often breaks down the Old English into more modern terms, or relates the scenes to circumstances the women might have faced in their own lives.

In “The Taming of the Shrew,” the women incorporated modern costumes and music, but the language was all Shakespeare's. With powerful inflection and physical comedy, they earned plenty of laughs and applause from the audience, which was made up of other offenders.

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Anglea Donaldson played Hortensio and said that, for a lot of the practices, she couldn't understand the dialogue. Once the women began to act together, it all clicked into place.

Donaldson, 47, said she only signed up for the program initially because her friends were doing it, but soon found that she enjoyed the chance to come out of her shell and experience another perspective. She liked performing, too.

“I enjoyed the fact that I was able to make someone else’s day and put a smile on somebody else’s face, as well as my own at the same time, and escape all the chaos and everything that goes on around you,” she said. “It really just put me in an element of ... feeling free, and open to new things, and I enjoyed that.”



*Jennifer Pauley, acting as Caesar, walks into the center the circle created by participants of the Shakespeare Corrected program, while Alice Eckart, reading as Calpurina, tries to convince her not to leave, during a scene reading at the Decatur Correctional Center.*

Teresa Wright brought an assured confidence to her portrayal of Petruchio, whose attempts to woo the shrewish Katherina inspire the play's title. Wright, 44, said Miller's instruction helps the women relax onstage, and the atmosphere in practices is always supportive and never judgmental.

Being able to perform and hear positive comments afterward was very humbling, she said.

“You'd go down the hall (and hear), 'Girl, you were so funny,' and, 'You guys did an excellent job, I really enjoyed myself.' You never thought that you would be able to find that in a prison setting like this, especially with Shakespeare,” she said. “Not everybody understands Shakespeare, but we made it our own, to where they could understand it.”

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*Alex Miller, an associate professor of theater at Millikin University, gives advice to Amanda Houk on how she should read her lines.*

Wright has been at the Decatur Correctional Center for nearly five years, though she just began participating in the Shakespeare program last year. With 24 months to go, she said she's looking forward to "Macbeth" and the next production beyond that.

She said she used to have a problem with being able to laugh and feel carefree but participating in the program has made her "lighter."

Several other women said it helped them build up their self-confidence, including Dawn Green.

Green, 49, said she didn't think she'd be able to accomplish all the necessary memorization but was blessed to have played two different roles in the spring play. A friend from her church back in Greenville said she was proud of Green, too.

"It helps me build up my self-esteem, have confidence in myself, that I can do something without the use of alcohol or drugs," she said.

Keyshaunna Barfield said she never wanted to perform in front of people before.

She credited Miller and his students with helping her overcome that severe stage fright. They helped make sure that the women understood what they were saying long before they had memorized their lines, right down to the punctuation, she said.

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“The most surprising thing is everybody’s ambition,” said Barfield, 28. “That’s what made it all come together, because everybody wanted to do excellent on their parts. When you’re driven with that ambition, that makes it all come together.”



*Tiffany Wendel reads from Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" as Shylock during the Shakespeare Corrected program at the the Decatur Correctional Center Tuesday. Alex Miller, right, an associate professor of theatre at Millikin University, has lead the program through four productions including this year's which will be "Macbeth."*

That sense of unity among the offenders also helped encourage Cora Hines, who said she never signed up for drama programs in school because of her extreme shyness. At 61, she said she is proud of herself for getting up onstage and doing something she never thought she would.

After she signed up for the Shakespeare program, she wasn't sure she could take on the acting, but Miller and the other women kept assuring her she could. So she did, and Hines said doing so has changed her life forever.

“You’re not in this alone,” she said of the program. “There’s people to help you. There’s people behind you. There’s people close to you. There’s people for you, rooting for you.”